

QUESTIONS FOR GOV. HALEY BARBOUR:

MBJ: Tell us your ideas on education reform for Mississippi, and how the MAEP formula fits into your plans.

GHB: State Superintendent Hank Bounds is on the right track when he says dropout prevention, high school redesign, teacher recruitment and retention, and other actions are very important. Keeping students in school longer, developing coursework that could lead to a highly skilled job and career, and making sure teachers have discipline in their classrooms are important to parents and taxpayers, too. During my administration, K-12 spending has increased by \$529 million—the largest increase in K-12 spending in any four year period in state history. Teachers have received pay raises that bring the average salary to about \$43,000—the highest in state history. For the first time, we've fully funded the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP)—a program I believe should be funded at 100% every year to help local school districts. We should continue to build on the more than 20% increase in teacher pay and also include additional pay mentoring and outstanding performance; screen every first-grader for dyslexia and other disabilities; and better utilize the existing early childhood education programs to help our kids get ready to learn. Beyond K-12, it is equally as important to support stable funding increases for our universities and community colleges. Education is the number quality of life issue and the number one economic development issue and, as such, will continue to be one of my top priorities.

MBJ: How do you plan to improve access to healthcare for Mississippians?

GHB: One of the best ways I believe we can improve healthcare access for Mississippians is the creation of a "Mississippi Health Insurance Exchange," which would make it easier and more affordable for more employers — especially small businesses — to offer their employees health insurance, provide them with more choices, and make it easier for employees to keep their insurance when they change jobs. More information is coming soon on this subject. I also believe we should protect our most vulnerable citizens by enrolling all eligible children in the State Children's Health Insurance Program and protect Medicaid for those who are truly needy by ensuring everyone receiving Medicaid benefits is qualified. These measures, in addition to improving our medical technology system and working to increase the number of physicians in our state, will result in more accessible healthcare for more Mississippians. There's another element of health care, too, one in which Mississippians themselves must take the initiative and help improve their own health. For example, Marsha has led the "Let's Go Walkin', Mississippi" campaign with Blue Cross/Blue Shield. Through this effort many, many people have seen the health benefits of walking.

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MBJ: Where do we stand on rebuilding the Mississippi Gulf Coast, and what needs to happen in the next four years to accomplish the goal of bringing it back better than ever?

GHB: The recovery and rebuilding of our Gulf Coast after Katrina is a job that has many facets and won't be finished for a while. Although we've made great strides, there is still much work to be done, especially in terms of housing. I've said many times that safe, reliable housing for coastal residents remains the most critical issue following Hurricane Katrina. We are aggressively addressing this issue by continuing to implement my comprehensive housing recovery program, which has already assisted nearly 18,000 Mississippi families and is financing the construction of 16,000 units of affordable rental housing. A crucial aspect to rebuilding the Coast is making sure maintain a stable statewide insurance market: toward that end, I have supported development of a federal program on all-perils insurance coverage and a federal catastrophic disaster reinsurance program. We're providing grants and other types of financial support to local communities, helping to foster community revitalization projects to improve infrastructure and to rebuild downtown areas for economic development, job creation, and quality of life. In terms of rebuilding, we've got a might tall mountain ahead of us. But I'm confident that working together, we will prevail in our goal of a Gulf Coast that's bigger and better than ever.

MBJ: What are your plans legislatively for a tax code overhaul? What obstacles do you foresee?

GHB: I will soon appoint a special commission of experts to conduct a comprehensive study on the impact of local, state and federal taxes on Mississippians. The commission will recommend how to make the system fair for all, with the understanding that everyone should pay their fair share of taxes. I would like to see a tax cut. Ideally, I'd like to see a tax system that enhances the creation of new jobs and economic growth. Let's wait until we have some recommendations before trying to identify obstacles to passage. For me, it would be hard to oppose a better, fairer system. Before implementing any type of substantial tax reform, post-Katrina state revenues must be stable and our state budget must be sound. If developed properly, I'm confident a revamped tax can be very helpful in reducing barriers to job creation and setting a firm and fair foundation for collecting revenues to pay for essential government services.

MBJ: Tort reform greatly improved the business climate in Mississippi. What does the business community need now to truly prosper?

GHB: After I proposed and the Legislature passed the Tort Reform Act of 2004, our state has continued to transition from one with an unfair legal system to a state that gets a second look from business leaders across the nation. Tort reform was an important part of our job creation plan—now, lawsuit abuse is no longer draining our state's economy, and companies can and do feel confident in

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locating their businesses here. Because of tort reform, a commitment to not raising taxes, and balancing the state's budget, Mississippi's economy is doing relatively well, more people are working than ever, and personal incomes are up considerably over the past three years, to record levels. I believe we are poised for more job creation and continued long-term growth. Some ways we can ensure the continuation of this economic momentum include overhauling our tax code to reduce barriers to job creation; opposing unnecessary bureaucratic regulations that make it harder for small businesses to succeed; and keeping the state on solid financial footing by continuing to live within our means. We've made a significant amount of progress during my first administration, where we dug out of a \$720 million financial hole without raising taxes or shortchanging our priorities like education and law enforcement. As long as we remain fiscally responsible while prioritizing job creation projects and economic development, Mississippi's business community – and the employees who earn paychecks from it – will continue to reap the benefits.

MBJ: There's been talk for some time of you being tapped for national office, most recently as a vice presidential candidate. What does that potential mean for both Mississippi and your career?

GHB: Thank you for the thought, but, as I've said before, I'm still on hurricane duty here in Mississippi.

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Deleted: You know, I can't imagine why a Republican candidate for president would choose somebody from Mississippi as his running mate. If a Republican candidate doesn't carry Mississippi for president, he won't carry but about three states. As it stands, there's a lot of work to be done right here in Mississippi, and I'm committed to making that happen.

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